

Coalition: A Model of Supporting Child Development

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Traditionally, children's development has been measured at an individual level. However, the reality is that individual support systems alone do not produce meaningful impacts on learning and development (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2020). Research into early years has consistently shown that family, school, and community environments impact children's outcomes. Thus, these contextual factors should be considered vital in assisting children in developing skills to achieve academic and lifelong success. Given this shift, organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, and the American Psychological Association identified a strong need to create a new approach that would focus on promoting children's development within the context of their neighborhoods (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2021; American Psychological Association, 2017; Center on the Developing Child, 2023).

Early childhood professionals have understood that they must gain a community-level understanding of how resources should be allocated to build community support systems to promote child development and prepare children for school (Korn, Hammond, Hennessy, Must, Pachucki, & Economos, 2021). Community-based interventions take a more holistic approach, focusing on children's development in the context of their neighborhoods; therefore, they promote a change on a broader, more ecological scale. Strategies that focus on the whole community, including coalitions, are more likely to have a broader effect and impact children's development (Mohun Himmelweit & Lee, 2022).

WHAT ARE COALITIONS?

Coalitions have been defined in many different ways. This article describes coalitions as a group of individuals representing diverse organizations, civic groups, or constituencies and directing their efforts and actions to reach a shared goal (Butterfoss, 2015). Coalitions facilitate organizational change by evaluating the problem, assessing needs and assets, exchanging information, creating and implementing action plans, sharing resources, or planning activities (Wolff, 2010; Butterfoss et al., 2008). Coalitions might function more informally when members work together temporarily until a coalition goal is achieved and then decide to disband; they may function more formally when a coalition becomes a functioning organization with a defined community focus, funding, or a governing body. Coalitions are structured and multilayered partnerships where collaboration is central to coalition building, effectiveness, and sustainability (Community Tool Box, n.d.). Moreover, please be aware that several terms to describe coalitions are frequently used interchangeably. These include *collaboration*, *collaborative partnership*, *alliance*, or *network*.

TYPES OF COALITIONS

Coalitions fall into three categories: (1) grassroots coalitions, (2) professional coalitions, and (3) community-based coalitions:

- **Grassroots coalitions.** Grassroots coalitions are formed by a group of individuals in a given community or neighborhood with the goal of provoking positive changes (Longley, 2020). Grassroots movements originate among citizens, the bottom-up approach, rather than among professionals or individuals with some degree of power, the top-down approach. Here, members of the affected community are partners in the process, for instance, being actively involved and influencing decision-making (Wolff et al., 2017).
- **Professional coalitions.** Professional coalitions are agency-based driven formations. These entities bring together a group of professional organizations that come together “either in time of crisis or as a long-term approach to increase their power and influence” (Butterfoss, 2007, p. 32). Professional coalitions have become a popular vehicle across various sectors and organizations to promote change and call for action, especially for state and federal agencies or not-for-profit organizations (Longley, 2020).
- **Community-based coalitions.** Community-based coalitions differ from other types of coalitions in that they bring together both professionals and grassroots members and represent various community sectors, including state and local agencies, grassroots organizations, civic leaders, faith-based agencies, local citizens, or universities (McKibban & Steltenpohl, 2019). Community coalitions trigger a population-level change as they mobilize the entire community and address various community problems: “...they are directed by residents and sector representatives who have a genuine voice in determining the best strategies to address local problems” (National Coalition Institute, 2019, p. 3). Such coalitions place most emphasis on (1) representation from multiple community sectors, (2) attention to multiple community issues, (3) active local citizen participation, and (4) bottom-up planning and decision making.

PARTICIPATION BENEFITS

Coalitions help build community social capital. Social capital has been described as “the social relationships and patterns of reciprocal, enforceable trust that enable people and institutions to gain access to resources necessary to fulfill a particular need or solve a specific problem” (Schneider, 2017, p. 6). As coalitions bring individual citizens and local organizations together, the members create an action plan to achieve the shared goal through an established vision, mission, and values. The coalition’s structure and implementation plan support building the community’s social capital, foster a sense of community, and encourage citizen participation at different ecological levels; in other words, when communities have substantial social capital, children living in them benefit (National Institute for Children's Health Quality, 2023).

Coalitions help create collaboration among those interested in investing in the early years. Coalitions offer a valuable tool – collaboration. When community organizations and grassroots members mobilize, they can achieve more working together than any other independent organization. For instance, schools alone will never tackle the issue of educational disparities within economically marginalized communities. They need support, for instance, from human service and government agencies, local community organizations, and, importantly, those directly affected by the problem (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018).

Provoking change at the local level. Coalitions’ outreach varies from large-scale national initiatives to state efforts to a more community-focused impact. Since coalitions can include local citizens, grassroots, and professional agencies, their focus aims to promote positive change within their community. Coalitions are one of the techniques of community organizing, and there are various reasons why members and organizations form coalitions. Effective coalitions lead to the implementation of new programs and services for children and families, more robust and better coordinated local early learning systems, as well as increased opportunities for children and families to access resources, including safe housing, adequate nutrition, opportunities to witness and develop healthy relationships, and access to early education (National Institute for Children's Health Quality, 2023).

This list provides information and resources related to building and maintaining effective coalitions:

- [Building an Early Childhood Community Coalition](#)
- [The Community Tool Box](#)
- [Coalition Resources from the Illinois Department of Human Services](#)
- [Coalition Guide Resource](#)
- [Coalition Building Toolkit from the Emergency Medical Services for Children Innovation & Improvement Center](#)

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